

Housing and the Chicago Freedom Movement

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Racism, slums, and the ghettos had been the reality for blacks in Chicago. While the city permitted its earlier ethnic groups to enter the mainstream of American life, blacks were locked into the lower classes of social and economic systems within the city. During the 1960s, most blacks in Chicago were confined to what the city considered to be the ghetto and had to endure second class treatment regardless of their social or economic status.

Therefore, the struggle to obtain better housing was an obstacle that black Chicagoans had to endure. But the worst off were the poor blacks who made up forty percent of the city's black population. Most of these people were forced to deal with rat infested apartments, no heat, and lead poisoning that caused the deaths of many children. Being black and poor in Chicago also led to poor or substandard education and, as a result, froze many blacks in the city out of a better life by both race and poverty and gave them a dim view of achieving better.

The living conditions for blacks in Chicago from the early years of migration from southern states in the 1910s up until the 1960s were inhumane. Betty Washington, a black Chicagoan during the movement in the 1960s, talked about her apartment, "The building was originally a six flat, but twelve families are now living there. This is outrageous. How can twelve families live in a six flat and be comfortable? It's impossible." As a result of overcrowded apartments, landlords could collect more in rent and showed a lack of respect for the African-American residents who inhabited these buildings and apartments. When the tenants informed their landlords about this and other

problems, often nothing was done to correct these issues.

To bring national exposure to the housing problems that plagued Chicago's African-American community in 1966, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Al Raby, a civil rights leader in Chicago, developed a plan as part of the Chicago Freedom Movement to improve housing conditions. The forming of rent strikes and tenant unions gave African-American residents living in the ghettos of Chicago a voice to express their discontent to slum landlords, realtors, and the political machine that upheld these unfair housing practices. If buildings were not repaired by landlords and realtors, the residents then would not pay rent. The monies were put in a building fund that tenants used to repair buildings on their own. This action of tenant unions and rent strikes proved to be most effective as Martin Luther King, Jr. and his family took up residence on Chicago's West Side at 1550 South Hamlin Avenue to experience first hand the slum conditions African-Americans faced in Chicago.

On July 10, 1966, Al Raby and Martin Luther King, Jr. placed housing demands on the door of Chicago's city hall to combat the housing issues. The demands proposed:

1. "The mayor should immediately launch a new program to enforce the Chicago Fair Housing Ordinance effectively and vigorously everywhere in the city;
2. the Chicago Real Estate Board should give support;
3. the Chicago Housing Authority should adopt a policy of no more high risk public housing projects in the Negro ghetto;
4. the Cook County Department of Public Aid should end the containment policy of seeking housing for and placing Negro families solely in ghetto communities; and
5. the Urban Renewal program should adopt a policy of using its relocation services to break down segregation barriers and to promote an open city."

These demands were guaranteed to ensure equality

in housing.

Lead poisoning was also a major issue that existed within Chicago housing. For example, at 842 West 61st Street, a child chewed on the window sill of his home, and approximately two to three months later, his eyes began to cross, his skin broke out, and his hearing appeared to be affected. Five days after the mother found out he had lead poisoning, he died. "Many people went through this same problem because the poison flourished throughout most houses on this block and in the community." Many African-American residents also did not have access to medical treatment. A local newspaper wrote, "By the time they actually got to the hospital they would have to wait because there were forty or more children under treatment".

Al Raby and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood the actions of the freedom movement had to force the Chicago metropolitan area to lead the rest of the nation in the solution of the problem on fair housing. There was need for change and the Chicago Freedom Movement was created to make the necessary changes.

In conclusion, before the Chicago Freedom Movement was created, housing was a huge problem. People died from lead poisoning because of the materials used to build the homes. People lived in overcrowded homes. People shared bathrooms with other families. But then actions were enforced that helped black Chicagoans. This movement created equality in pay and affordable housing which allowed better living conditions for families. Al Raby's demands through the Chicago Freedom Movement were a great success for the slums in Chicago. According to Dr. King, a slum was "any area of real estate where everything is taken out and nothing comparable to what is taken out is put back that would bring the community up." Through the Chicago Freedom Movement,

the “slums” was demolished and bound to never return again. [From "Poisoned Tot's Mom Issues Plea," *Chicago Daily Defender*, July 29, 1963; Program of the Chicago Freedom Movement, July 1966; and "Westside Group Declares War on Lead Poisoning," *Chicago Daily Defender*, Oct. 27, 1965.]